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AUTHOR Floyd, Nubra Elaine
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ABSTRACT

Technical assistance provided to a public school enrichment program for low income ethnic minority students at New Haven's Hillhouse High School during the 1985-1986 school year is described. Attention is directed to three areas for which consultative support and technical assistance were provided: the Parent Contact Network, the Library Research Unit, and the High School Adjustment Seminar. The enrichment program, which is funded by the Josiah Macy, Jr. Foundation and the Carol Herzog Foundation, is a four-year intensive academic program with special supportive services to prepare students for college and professional schools. The Parent Contact Network promotes communication with the parents of students in the program. The library research unit, an elective offering of the program, involved six science, English, and mathematics teachers who were assigned to assist students in using the library to research a health-related topic. The High School Adjustment Seminar was a special diagnostic intervention that sought to determine why approximately a quarter of the 60 students were doing poorly in at least one of their regular academic courses. (SW)

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James Hillhouse High School
New Haven, Connecticut

1985-86 School Year

Yearend Report on Macy Program Consultation

July 25, 1986

Nubra Elaine Floyd, PhD

Center for Research on Education, Culture and Ethnicity
Institution for Social and Policy Studies
Yale University

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Macy/Herzog Pre-Collegiate Enrichment Program

The Hillhouse Macy/Herzog Prep Program is a four year intensive academic program with special supportive services to prepare students for college and professional schools.

The program is designed to meet the needs of both well motivated and potentially motivated students. Eligibility is determined by standardized test scores, teacher grades, teacher recommendations and parental commitment to the program.

The program is funded by the Josiah Macy, Jr. Foundation and the Carl Herzog Foundation. These two foundations are dedicated to increasing the number of minority students academically prepared and able to pursue careers in the health professions.

The program goals are: 1.) to improve student cognitive functioning in the areas of reading, writing, problem solving, critical and analytical thinking and research skills; and 2.) to improve affect through supportive experiences that will increase students' self-confidence and allow them to have higher expectations of themselves.

Center for Research on Education, Culture and Ethnicity

CRECE is a departmental unit of Yale University's Institution for Social and Policy Studies that supports the study of issues related to minority education. From 1984 to 1986 CRECE also supported The Program of Resources for the Improvement of Minority Education.

PRIME was a research, development, and technical assistance agency created by the City College of New York, Yale University, and the Josiah Macy, Jr. Foundation that sought to provide leadership and coordination to several public school programs funded by the Josiah Macy Foundation.

This paper reports on the results of a PRIME consultation that was undertaken at Hillhouse High School in New Haven, Connecticut while the author was supported as a CRECE postdoctoral fellow during the 1985-86 academic year.

Yearend Report On Macy Program Consultation

What follows is a summary report* on the three major areas of involvement (The Parent Contact Network, The Library Research Unit, and The High School Adjustment Seminar) through which I provided consultative support and technical assistance to the staff of the Macy-Herzog Prep Program at New Haven's Hillhouse High School during the 1985-86 school year. It is intended as a brief yearend accounting of my activities as a member of the resource team that was supported through the Macy Foundation project grant administered by The Institution For Social And Policy Studies, rather than as an evaluation of the Hillhouse program but may also be useful as partial documentation of those three aspects of the program.

Report On The Parent Contact Network

Purpose Of The Network

The Parent Contact Network is a distributed effort system for communicating with the parents of students in the Macy program. It was developed with the cooperation of Allen Grenet, chairman of the History Department at Hillhouse and a member of the Macy Program Steering Committee who had volunteered to

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*A more extensive version of this report is also available, which includes the following attachments: a list of the parents who participated in the contact network and a copy of the mailing that was used; curriculum materials from the research unit; meeting schedules for the adjustment seminar, session notes, and the results of a participants' evaluation.

be faculty/parent liason. When the first Macy parents meeting was held in September of 1985, a signup sheet was circulated to identify those individuals who were interested in becoming members of the Parent Involvement Committee, and the resulting list of names was the starting point for creating the parents contact network. Shortly after I began going to the high school in late October, a decision was made by the Steering Committee to hold the next such meeting on Thursday, December 12th, since parents would already be coming to the high school that night to pick up the first report card of the school year. I agreed to arrange for notifying them about it and suggested that it would be a good opportunity to make initial use of the Parent Involvement Committee.

Plan For Parent Contact

During the second week of November, I called all fourteen of the parents whose names were on the list and asked if they would be willing to telephone three or four other Macy parents to tell them about the upcoming meeting. One woman (Sandra Beamon) said her son was no longer in the program, but all of the others agreed to make the calls. I then told them they could expect to receive a mailing shortly after Thanksgiving that would contain information about the meeting and the names and numbers of the students whose parents they were to contact. I also said I would be calling them again during the first week in December to see how they had made out.

The mailing went out on November 25th, and when I contacted them again in early December about half of the committee members had completed their

calls. I made arrangements to call the others back within a few days. One woman (Mae Whitley) said that for some reason she had not received her letter, so I sent her another one as quickly as possible. Once all the calls had been made, it appeared that at least thirty parents would definitely be attending the meeting, and most of the others were not sure whether they would attend. Only a few said they could not attend because of illness, work or prior commitments, and there were even fewer who could not be contacted at all.

Unanticipated Communication Problems

The meeting was held in the library of the high school between 8:15 and 9:00 in the evening. Based on what the committee members reported, it looked like we might get as many as forty or fifty parents, but, as it turned out, less than a dozen actually came. An informal followup suggested that the relatively small number of attenders could be at least partially explained in terms of complications resulting from the decision to hold the meeting on report card night. For one thing, there was considerable delay in the school sending out the notification about report cards, and some Macy parents may have thought that was the purpose of the call they received. Two or three parents who had been contacted did tell me later that they had come to pick up the report cards and then gone home without realizing there was a Macy meeting being held in the library.

I also learned, however, that in some cases parents were so upset about the poor grades their children received that they felt they should go home

rather than try to deal with school personnel when they were in such a state--or else they chose to seek out individual teachers in their classrooms for an explanation of the grades. In fact, a few of the Macy teachers ended up missing the meeting as well, because they were busy with parent conferences in their rooms, and those teachers who did make it seemed somewhat reluctant to engage in discussion with individual parents. This was even more problematic than the attendance figures in that it meant the meeting did little to actually help parents understand what was going on with the program.

Other Possible Approaches

Many of the parents seemed to have expectations that were not likely to be met in a first year of operation, given the experimental nature of the program and the wide range of ability levels represented among the students. One way to help them develop a more realistic picture of what can be accomplished and of how they can be of help would be to broaden parents' perspectives on the nature of the high school experience and on the types of problems that even capable students are likely to encounter during their high school careers. At this point there's no way to be sure that attendance would improve if future parents' meetings were devoted to such discussion, but it should help to open a better channel of communication with those who do attend.

Whatever the proposed agenda, the Parent Contact Network provides a more personalized means of communicating about upcoming events, and it is also a

valuable means of promoting interaction among parents. Once in place it should be used as much as possible, since the more frequently it is used, the more effective it is likely to become. When the Macy dinner was held in June, students were given notices to take home, and it looked like most of the same parents were there who had attended the December meeting as well as a few others who had not. It's difficult to know what to make of that, but it would be interesting to see what kind of results might be obtained by using both methods of contact for the first parents meeting of the 1986-87 school year.

Report On The Library Research Unit

Schedule Of Activities

The library research unit was part of the Macy Skills elective and ran from November 26th to January 28th. It involved six teachers from the Science, English and Math Departments who were each assigned to assist a group of ten students in using the library to research a health related topic. I was asked by Jane Baljevic, who is chair of the English Department at Hillhouse and one of the Macy Program Coordinators, to provide these teachers with consultative support and technical assistance as needed. Since the plan for the unit was to be an evolving one, I offered to keep track of its various phases and to periodically revise and distribute copies of the schedule as work in progress.

Selection Of Topics

While the teachers decided early on that the students would choose their own research topics, relatively little consideration was given to the matter of how the group decision making process would be managed. As a result, a few vocal students in each group tended to choose the topic, and the group as a whole missed out on what could have been an important opportunity to begin working together more effectively. All of the topics that were chosen had to do with some aspect of human sexuality and/or reproduction, and, although that did seem to be appropriate subject matter for a health unit, most of the students were not really comfortable dealing openly with such issues. Instead of trying to help them talk about this discomfort and to work through to a better understanding of the research enterprise, the teachers seemed to be mainly concerned about coming up with a topic as quickly as possible and then moving on to the next scheduled activity.

What may be more to the point, however, is that they were not adequately trained in group facilitation to be able to make the transition from their typically directive classroom style to something that would be more empowering for students. Once I recognized this as a problem, I arranged to do at least one group process facilitation with each research group during the course of the unit. While that felt like a step in the right direction, it would have taken a much more extensive intervention to bring about the kind of overall change in instructional style necessary to prepare the students for high quality research work.

Source Of Reference Materials

After the topics were selected, the teachers began to deal with the question of where the students would be expected to look for reference materials. One possibility, given an apparent lack of motivation on the part of some, was that they would only be expected to use the school library or material they already had at home. Another possiblity was that they would also be encouraged to make use of the public library and perhaps even the library at Southern Connecticut College. The underlying issue had to do with whether or not the program could provide meaningful challenges for the most able students without unnecessarily discouraging those who had come to it less well prepared to undertake accelerated work. After much discussion it was finally decided that one or two of the more capable students from each group would be selected for a field trip to the public library and would bring back articles for the others. In addition, I brought in materials from the public library, from some of the Yale University libraries, and from the Planned Parenthood Resource Center.

At first, I assumed the teachers would use these resources to prepare for working with their groups, but I soon realized that, in most cases, they were simply giving them to the students to read. In order to get some sense of how well the students were likely to comprehend such advanced level materials, I selected one particular article on teenage pregnancy that I had found in the Yale Medical School Library and asked for volunteers from each group to read it and come up with questions about the information it contained. Six students completed the article analysis task, but only two

of them appeared to understand the content well enough to ask relevant questions about it. It should also be noted that there were probably some students who would have been able to understand the article but who chose not to volunteer for the additional work. Even so, it seems likely that if advanced level resources are to be used effectively, the teachers will have to take more responsibility for reading and interpreting them to the students.

Evaluation Of Student Performance

Despite the fact that the students were expected to give oral presentations of their research findings in a large group context, little or no systematic effort was made to help them develop the necessary public speaking skills. Few of the students were actually able to give clear and coherent presentations, and they were mainly evaluated on their individual work in the research groups. In addition, the teachers decided to give a brief quiz after each presentation to see if the students in the audience had been paying attention. I agreed to make up the quizzes from questions that the groups would supply, and, as it turned out, I also administered and scored them. It might actually have been better, if the type of quiz that was developed had been given to the members of each group as a way of reviewing the material that they were going to present. As it was, student performance on the quizzes seemed to have more to do with prior level of knowledge than with level of attention during the presentations.

Report On The High School Adjustment Seminar

Purpose Of The Seminar

At the end of the first marking period, about a quarter of the sixty Macy students were doing poorly in at least one of their regular academic courses. The High School Adjustment Seminar was a special diagnostic intervention that sought to determine why this was the case and what might be done to remedy the situation. After discussing the idea at length with Edmund Scarpa, who is chair of the Math Department at Hillhouse and one of the Macy Program Coordinators, I called each of the students in question and their parents to talk with them about the seminar. Eleven of them expressed an interest in participating, but only seven came to the initial session, and there were five who eventually became regular members.

Diagnostic Sessions

The group met four times a week from January 7th to February 13th and on a more infrequent basis from February 24th to March 26th. Sessions typically ran from 2:45 to 4:30 in the afternoon, which was about an hour longer than expected, and even then group members often seemed reluctant to leave. Although no specific topics were designated during the initial phase, I used a style of facilitation that involved a good deal of questioning and frequent attempts at clarifying whatever spontaneous comments were made. Four doctoral students from Yale (Nina Gross, John Mason, Peter Matthews, and Bruce O'Brien) took turns observing me as I worked with the group and giving me feedback on the process. We concluded from the behavior that we

saw in the early sessions, that most of the group members were simply not prepared to communicate effectively in a classroom setting. Furthermore, it seemed they were having difficulty getting along with their peers as well as with their teachers.

Parent Conferences

At the end of the first three weeks I had in-depth telephone conferences with the parents in which I tried to identify elements of the family environment that the seminar participants might have in common. What I discovered was that all five were last born children and seemed to be struggling to establish some degree of emotional autonomy within the family. I also learned that all of these students were being raised by single parents and were sometimes asked to fill the role of the missing partner. As a result, there tended to be such heavy demands for helping at home that they had little time to pursue personal interests or to begin developing a social life outside the family. What sometimes made matters worse was the fact that older sisters or brothers had been lost to the family when they went off to college, and it was therefore somewhat threatening for parents to see the youngest child making academic progress.

Communication Skills Training

During the second three weeks of the seminar, the sessions were structured around a series of topics. On Mondays there were sensitivity training sessions, during which the school social worker sat in on the group. In the first Monday session the technique of giving feedback was introduced by

having everyone talk some about the roles that each person played in the group, and the following Monday we talked about how our roles in the group compared with the roles that we played in our families. These discussions took place in a round-robin format and were intended to prepare the students for the Tuesday sessions when individual teachers were invited, and they were given an opportunity to work on their communication problems with that teacher. Thursdays were devoted to a writing tutorial with the graduate students, during which group members were asked to do essays on their experiences at Hillhouse, on their family experiences, and on what it takes to get into college. Trips were also arranged to the Yale campus, so that they could learn to use the mainframe text editor for typing up their work.

Seminar Related Activities

Although the seminar was originally planned to last six weeks, near the end of the skills training phase some of the students indicated that they wanted to continue to meet as a group for a combination study hall and social activity, and five additional weeks of sessions were scheduled. The first three weeks of the extension period were mainly devoted to group discussion of personal and family issues, but there were also study sessions for homework and special projects. During the last two weeks the emphasis was on assessment and closure, and I conducted individual interviews in which the students were asked to evaluate the seminar.

Near the end of the school year, I did classroom observations to get a sense of how the students were doing at that point, and, I talked with some of

their teachers, afterwards, who indicated that in some cases they had seen considerable in-class improvement. I was also able to arrange home visits with three of the families and had followup telephone conferences with the other two mothers to find out how they felt the seminar project had gone. While all of the parents seemed to feel good about the things I had done, there were some who expressed the need for further support and assistance in dealing with the kinds of problems their children were experiencing. In two cases I obtained referral information for the families, and I actually helped one parent to arrange for psychological counseling.

When I took the seminar group on a field trip to the Yale campus in February, they had lunch on campus and then sat in on a meeting of the Prime research seminar at ISPS. As a followup activity, Bruce O'Brien and I took three of them on a day trip to the Boston area at the end of May. (The other two group members sustained physical injuries shortly before the trip and were unable to go). We did a walking tour of Harvard Yard, and then Holly Carroll, a friend who teaches in Newton, showed us around the Peabody Museum. After that Bruce gave us a driving tour of historic Boston.

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